

BOOK REVIEW

How to Change: The Science of Getting from Where You are to Where You Want to Be

Author: Katherine “Katy” Milkman
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SUMMARY OF THE CONTENT

Author credibility: Katy Milkman is an award-winning behavioral scientist and the James G. Dinan Professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Milkman is the host of Charles Schwab’s popular behavioral economics podcast *Choiceology*. She earned her undergraduate degree from Princeton University, where she studied Operations Research and American Studies, and her PhD from Harvard University, where she studied Computer Science and Business. She and her work are regularly featured on various major media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street*

Journal, and *National Public Radio* (USA).

The overall arc of this book centers around one of the most difficult tasks that individuals and institutions face: change. Dr. Milkman explores the science of behavioral change through the field of behavioral science. Understanding there has been a boom in the interest in behavioral science over the past 20 years or so, in this book she attempts to provide various practical tools to assist individuals and institutions with the extremely difficult subject of change. In the end she does just that by providing feedback in a way that is easy to read and understandable for both an academician and a practitioner.

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Professor Milkman tries to answer the proverbial question: why do so many change efforts fail? Why in today's world, when the shelves are filled with thousands of self-help and management books centered on the topic of change and new titles hitting the bookshelves weekly, do change efforts continue to fail? Her answer is, choosing the right strategy is key, something most of us do not do.

She goes on to delve a bit deeper into the reason for the failure by outlining that in order to give yourself the best chance for success, you must take into consideration what she calls your "opponent" and develop a strategy that fits your particular situation. In order to be successful at change, targeted strategies focused on behavior change are necessary.

The Forward of the book is written by the uberly successful American academic, psychologist, and popular science author, Dr. Angela Duckworth. Angela Duckworth's book, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, was a *New York Times* bestseller staying on the list for 21 weeks. In the Forward, she outlines what Katy Milkman has done with this book. This work assists us in becoming better problem solvers and does this by equipping us with the latest scientific knowledge.

CRITICAL EVALUATION

Strengths

One of the major strengths of this book is that the author's inputs are backed with empirical research

studies which she either conducted directly or for which she had close contact with the researcher who conducted the study. Additionally, she provides numerous examples of how she personally incorporated the various strategies outlined in her book into her personal and professional life.

Dr. Milkman outlines seven behavioral obstacles to change: getting started, impulsivity, procrastination, forgetting, laziness, lack of confidence, and conformity. Each chapter is dedicated to walking the reader through each obstacle and how each one can be overcome through the use of a proper strategy, all supported by a deep and relevant base of empirical research.

Another key strength of the book is the "Chapter Takeaways" provided at the end of each chapter. Here, the author provides the reader with a summary of the chapter's main points, outlined in clear, concise bullets for the reader to easily remember the salient points raised.

It is prudent to outline a few examples of behavioral change used in Professor Milkman's book that are worth repeating. She tackles the concept of *impulsivity* in Chapter 2. She outlines that in order to overcome impulsivity, which she refers to the tendency to favor temptations of instant gratification over larger long-term rewards, something economists call "present bias," we should consider a technique called *Temptation Bundling*.

Temptation bundling suggests that we should combine an existing habit with a new habit. One example

she gives is watching Netflix while running on the treadmill. This bundling

technique allows one to solve self-control problems (not exercising enough) by mixing activities we like to do with things we need to do and not feel as though we are wasting precious time.

Next she attempts to attack *forgetfulness*, which is outlined in chapter 4. Here, she highlights everyday events that people simply forget to do, some that may be of surprise to her readers. Things like getting flu shots (vaccinations) or voting! She outlines that forgetfulness is not always a made-up excuse. Working behind the scenes is something more serious, a failure to follow-through on things you want to do or stated that you want to do but in the end do not do.

In order to combat this, Milkman suggests the technique of cue based planning. This occurs when we link any form of action with a cue. Cues can occur from anything that triggers your memory, maybe to do with a specific time-frame or a location, or an object that is encountered. A great example that she provides centers around savings. One cue to save more may come whenever you receive a raise at work; this could lead you to increase your monthly retirement savings contribution.

The last example comes from Chapter 5, *laziness*. The author defines laziness, stating that “the tendency to follow the path of least resistance can stand in the way of change” (pg. 141). She gives a few

recommendations on how to overcome laziness. She suggests that having a proper default mechanism could help turn laziness into an asset that facilitates change (say, wasting less time on social media). She infers that these default mechanisms should become habits, which as we know will affect our behavior. Inculcating good habits (good behavior) places us on autopilot. Lastly, she recommends that we do this in the most flexible way possible.

Weaknesses

One of the major weaknesses of the book is the failure to address the full title of the book, the “...where you are to where you want to be” portion of the title. Professor Milkman never talks about the “present state verses future state” stance that all change management theories and/or interventions discuss.

Whether talking about Kurt Lewin and his Unfreeze-Change-Refreeze change model or Burke-Litwin’s model of organizational performance and change, there is the need to identify the necessity to understand where you are in the present (diagnosis) and where you believe you want to be in the future (which requires action usually through an intervention). In fact, she lightly covers the concept of interventions in her work, another weakness of the book.

A quick word search of the term, “intervention” comes up with eight instances of the word being used in the book; four of these inputs are listed on

her reference pages and the other four inputs talk about interventions, all centered around four-week iterations. On page 196 she states, “While heartened by our short-term success, I shared Angela’s (Angela Duckworth, author of *Grit*) disappointment that we hadn’t found more four-week interventions with lasting benefits” and then on the following page (pg. 197) she says:

Study after study (mine included) has shown that achieving transformative behavior change is more like treating a chronic disease than curing a rash. You can’t just slap a little ointment on it and expect it to clear up forever. The internal obstacles that stand in the way of change, which I’ve described in this book—obstacles such as temptation, forgetfulness, underconfidence, and laziness—are like the symptoms of a chronic disease. They won’t just go away once you’ve started “treating” them. They’re human nature and require constant vigilance.

Are four-week interventions that same ointment she is talking about?

In summary, the book was easy to read, and through the use of many applicable case studies, entertaining stories, and copious examples of research, allows the reader to begin to understand the complexity of this concept called change.

This book is recommended for anyone interested in change, from the individual looking for ideas or suggestions on how to overcome procrastination, to practitioners (leaders, managers, coaches) searching for new techniques to assist in the change process at the institutional level, and even to scholars and researchers seeking ideas and evidence on how research in the field of change management can be conducted and how it is progressing.